

The Historical and Cultural Ideals of the Siberian *Oblastnichestvo*

ELENA KOVALASCHINA

Translated by Alia A. Chaptykova, Khakasiia State University

Edited by David G. Anderson, University of Aberdeen

Abstract: This article examines the ideals of G. N. Potanin and N. M. Iadrintsev, who were the architects of the federalist Siberian *oblastnichestvo* movement of the second half of the 19th nineteenth century and beginning of the 20th twentieth century. In their day, the work of the *oblastniki* on the cultural specificity of native Siberian peoples had a great influence on popular opinion, on the popularization of ethnological theory, and on the general social and political credo to reform policy towards these people. The *oblastniki* rejected both ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism in the comparison of various peoples. Their eventual acceptance of cultural relativism, the idea of equality of cultural values between peoples, and need for a civil understanding of human history were all closely linked to their political program of promoting regionalism. Their regionalist idea put forth the idea that every social and cultural unit had the right to an independent existence and to have control over their own development.

Keywords: Siberia; cultural studies; *oblastnichestvo*; G. N. Potanin; N. M. Iadrintsev

The Siberian *oblastnichestvo* movement was part of the Russian federalist movement in the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. It grew in the peculiar political atmosphere of the 1860s. This was a time of the liberal modernization of the country that sparked society's interest in social and political issues. A stratum of intelligentsia—the *shestidesiatniki*—came together with the aim of improving society and, in particular, improving the lot of the common people instead of that of the state. The epoch contributed to a



special atmosphere for a group of Siberian students studying in Petersburg who would become famous participants in Siberian literary, scientific, and public life: G. N. Potanin, N. M. Iadrinsev, Ch. V. Valikhanov, S. S. Shashkov, N. I. Naumov, and others. Under the influence of A. P. Schapov's federalist ideal of Russian history and N. Kostomarov's proposals for Ukrainian national and cultural autonomy, the young Siberians came to the conclusion that Siberia was a colony of Russia. They described the 'servile' position of Siberia through the following factors:

- (1) That the criminals from all over Russia were sent to Siberia
- (2) That all natural resources were exported from it
- (3) That Siberian industry was not allowed to develop due to the artificially maintained limitations of the trade in raw, natural resources
- (4) That the state refused to subsidize cultural and educational life
- (5) That no attention was paid to the socioeconomic problems of the non-Russian population (i.e., the indigenous peoples) of Siberia.

They drew the attention of the public to these problems with the aim of finding a way to solve them. This became the goal of all of the popular, literary, and political activities of these Siberian patriots. They called themselves the *oblastniki* because of their proposal to achieve self-government for the region (an *oblast'*).

Potanin (1835–1920) and Iadrinsev (1842–1894) became the ideological leaders of this unofficial movement in public thought. In spite of their constant exchange of ideas it was clear that Iadrinsev worked out the concrete elements of the 'Siberian program'. Potanin dealt with the theoretical aspects of the program, which extended far beyond Siberian regional interests. The idea "of a country without any provinces" could be considered the core of the *oblastnichestvo* program. According to them, every sociocultural group should develop autonomously according to its own interests, which in turn were linked to their own cultural essences. This idea stood opposed to that of the later Imperial Russian political ideology and strategy of centralization, wherein the center claimed priority over the region. The root of the *oblastnichestvo* ideal was that the world's wealth lay in its multiculturalism, that multiculturalism should be the guide by which the world is structured. This philosophical foundation underwrote the entire political, socioeconomic, cultural, and historic program of the *oblastniki* in all practical aspects.

The above-mentioned philosophic ideal can also be found in the *oblastnik's* solution to the "question of non-Russian aliens [*inorodets*]." ¹ Politically, the program called for the state to withdraw its policy of paternalism and to recognize the rights of indigenous people to their land and to pursue their own way of life. It should be stressed that the *oblastniki* did not simply want to overcome the inertia of traditional attitudes to the *inorodtsy*. Their social and political ideas were quite ahead of their time. It is difficult to understand and appreciate *oblastnik* approach to this problem without raising the question of how they understood Siberian peoples themselves. This article demonstrates that ideas one brings to a cultural encounter often form one's ideas about the present and the proposed future for those people.

Although Sibirianists have researched the rich legacy of the Siberian *oblastniki*, their approach to understanding the cultural uniqueness of the *inorodtsy* has not been examined in detail. Most works on *oblastniki* generally note their role in collecting and studying folklore and ethnographic data. They also mention their attention to improving the living conditions of the Siberian peoples as well as the problem of educating them. Many authors also write of their struggle with chauvinistic and racial theories and especially their use of evolutionary theory to link Siberian aborigines to a general history of mankind. However in each case these themes are not the main focus of their analysis. S. F. Ol'denburg, M. N. Speranskii, and V. A. Gordlevskii, writing about Potanin in the early twentieth century, focused on his idea that the cultures of European and Asian peoples had equal value. ² Their opponent, the advocate of Russification M. A. Miropiev, also recognized the *oblastniki's* enthusiasm for "the idea of equality," which he described as an absurd and harmful dream fraught with the recognition of all people's political rights. ³ In the Soviet period, N. S. Smirnova drew attention to the theoretical and social importance of Potanin's work on folklore, which she described as a progressive and democratic treatment of the spiritual culture of a nomadic people. ⁴ A. M. Sagalaev and V. M. Kriukov made an important contribution to historiography by using a complex portrait of Potanin as an example of how scientific, social, and political views can be combined together in a subtle manner. ⁵ But even these works did not analyze in depth how the *oblastniki* appreciated the cultures of Siberian aboriginal peoples. Iadrintsev's work on culture (*kulturologiia*) has not yet received its due attention from researchers.

It is likewise important to pose the question of the historical and cultural ideas of the *oblastniki* not only to uncover their position towards

the *inorodtsy* but in order to understand the defining points of the ideology of *oblastnichestvo*. This article is my attempt to analyze Potanin's and Iadrintsev's historical-cultural ideas in the context of their worldview. Here, I will not examine either the ideological predecessors of the *oblastnichestvo* nor the participants in what later became the so-called political incarnation of the *oblastnichestvo*. The analysis here is centered around the points of view of Potanin and Iadrintsev, who are the most distinguished and consistent representatives of the *oblastnichestvo* ideal. In any event, no other member of this group of thinkers had raised in such depth the issue of the 'policy towards non-Russian aliens' (*inorodchetskaia politika*) or of aboriginal culture in particular. Without pretending to conduct an exhaustive investigation of how aboriginal culture is understood, I have tried to point out the most important instances without which it would be difficult to understand the main avenues by which the *oblastniki* approached the 'problem of the *inorodtsy*'. These include rejecting other condescending, patronizing, or paternalistic attitudes to Siberian peoples.

Potanin's and Iadrintsev's scientific works provide my main sources. In particular, I analyze those works devoted to the cultural heritage of the peoples of Asia, their works on the 'problem of *inorodtsy*' as well as their literary, popular, and political works and letters. Both the published and unpublished documents of the Potanin archive held at the scientific library of Tomsk State University have been used here, some of which are being presented here for the first time. I have also analyzed the works of P. A. Bessonov, V. P. Vasiliev, V. V. Stasov and others who were Potanin's and Iadrintsev's contemporaries, to give an idea of the popular views on the culture, the history, the present, and the past of the peoples of Siberia expressed in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

This article is divided into four parts, which correspond to several theoretical arguments. The first part deals with the ideological background of the epoch that helps us to understand why these problems were important to Potanin and to Iadrintsev. The second part is devoted to Potanin's 'Eastern hypothesis'. Here we do not judge the scientific merit of the hypothesis but pay attention only to its social significance and the ideological aspect. The third and fourth parts are devoted respectively to the problem of the correlation between Potanin's and Iadrintsev's historical-cultural views and the social-practical aspects of evolutionism. Iadrintsev's point of view is analyzed in a greater detail with the aim of supplying the shortage of attention paid to this theme in historiography as well.

Ideological Background

Academic science of the nineteenth and early twentieth century was characterized by a Europe-centered approach. It was not well tuned to the needs of non-industrial societies. Even ethnography itself was created out of a need to instill good conduct for the colonial rule of the metropole. It was not by chance that at the heart of ethnography's first and dominant doctrine of the nineteenth century—evolutionism—lay an Enlightenment concept of man and public progress.

By proclaiming an idea of the historical unity of mankind, and by judging the culture of non-European peoples to be that of the 'living past' (*zhivaia starina*) of the European peoples, evolutionists preserved a notion of the relative value of the cultural legacies of different people. Evolutionists denied to non-European cultures equal rights to decide their own development and to develop their own understanding of progress. In this scientific version of evolutionism we find the same Eurocentrism that we find in popular accounts. Ol'denburg, a Russian expert in Oriental studies, summarizes the popular point of view: "Europeans [*zapadnyi chelovek*] have a self-serving belief in their own culture. It is difficult for a European to see himself as an equal to people who have not built railways, a running water system, a sewerage system and so on. ... For Europeans, material culture became indispensable to the notion of culture itself. If there were no apparent signs [of material culture] the European considered such people savages or as people who had lost their culture."⁶ The problems of the development of the civilization and the interrelation of East and West were respectively solved in the same way. The Eurocentric way of seeing the world restricted the main characteristics of those regions to the categories of a superior and inferior culture.⁷ In spite of recognizing the richness of Oriental spiritual culture, and that the East was the motherland of quite a number of inventions, evolutionists refused to recognize its potential for self-development.⁸

Eastern 'sterility' and 'stagnation' were seen to stem from the lack of creative imagination that had inspired the West. Vasiliev, an expert in Oriental sciences, gave some examples of the great intellectual and moral influence of the West to prove it: "Modern scientists have proven that significant epics and dramas have been written in India due to the influence of Greek literature. ... We have shown more than once that Buddhism practiced almost everywhere in the East cannot claim to have appeared before Alexander's military marches. ... Christianity and Mohammedanism spread from the West. But history has not recorded

a single instance of indigenous (*tuzemnaia*) religion (that of the Indians or the Chinese) spreading to the West."⁹ The thesis that the East lacked the cultural initiative is present even in the idea of an 'exhausted Europe' (*ustalost' Evropy*). This thesis marked the stagnation of political life, science, and art in the West and called for the renewal of European culture by means of interaction with Asia. This idea was not simply present but even became popular to some extent.¹⁰ But the union of the West and the East was not supposed to take place on the basis of dialogue and a parity of cultures. Asia was simply to supply a "refreshing force" that would inspire the European world and give a new impulse to European culture aimed at creating a new life for the whole world. European civilization was still interpreted as global and universal.¹¹

Europe-centered views also influenced some opinions of the *oblastniki*. One can find certain formulae in their work that express the spirit of the time with respect to the non-European nations: "savages" (*dikari*), "the lower races," "a primitive way of life." The stereotyped image of "aliens" (*inorodets*) is presented as being "naive, trustful, deluded by shining trinkets," or as unprotected "junior brothers," and so on. The notions of "European culture" and "civilization" in their work take on positive qualities that provide the goals of social development. But all these conceptual and conversational clichés are incompatible with the internal structure of their thought—the pathos of their work. The creative work of *oblastniki* on the cultural heritage of the peoples of Asia has a contradiction within it. Their scholarly work is torn between evolutionism as an authoritative and progressive scientific foundation and the belief in the axiological importance of the diversity of the cultural image of mankind. The ethical question of using the paradigms of "the cultural center" and "the cultural periphery" could not help but cast doubt since it contradicted their public political position.

Their ideas, like the notion that mono-centrism or pluralism held power over cultural or historical contexts, carried a certain ideological weight that in turn influenced political practice with respect to the "peripheral" peoples and cultures. Thus, when the *Kulturtraegerer* advocated coercing nomads into a settled way of life during several government campaigns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they drew upon a common ideological basis with the most radical of the evolutionists. An example of this radical point of view was expressed by N. Przhevalskii after one of the battles with the Tanguts in which more than 1,300 bullets were shot: "It was not a victory of physical force, it was a victory of European spirit over the savages, the victory of civilization over the savages."¹²

Potinin's 'Eastern Hypothesis'

Potinin attached great importance to the ability of scientists to affect the spirit of the society and the direction of its development.¹³ In 1874, he promised P. P. Semenov that he would only undertake pure research. This promise was made soon after his return from political exile. Semenov agreed to include Potinin in his Central Asian expedition under his supervision, [providing a guarantee of his loyalty to the authorities]. But Potinin's promise should not be interpreted as his refusal to participate in public life, as some researchers have interpreted it.¹⁴ Rather, it meant a shift in his activities to another sphere. As he wrote to his friends: "For my part, I have said that I cannot stop loving my Siberia and I'd like to be able to work out a robust solution to solve several local Siberian problems."¹⁵

He took a great interest in folklore. This is a general quality of the 'democratic tradition' of the *shestidesiatniki* to whom he belonged. Even those researchers who criticize Potinin's scientific and social activities are unanimous in their high appreciation for his work as a collector and coordinator of collecting folklore. He encouraged the local societies to undertake ambitious ethnographic research to collect folkloric material. He organized a number of expeditions and started a series of scientific publications.¹⁶ His interest in folklore, aside from being important in awakening consciousness of the peoples of Asia, contributed to his appreciation of their contribution to world spiritual culture.

Both in his scientific and political activities, Potinin avoided the unpleasant centrism or "monomania" described by Iadrintsev. He acknowledged the unjust nature of a Eurocentric historical ideology. This led him to create a motto of his research: "Everything for Asia, everything from Asia" (*Vse—dlia Azii, vse—iz Azii*).¹⁷ His scientific credo—the protest against "the Arian arrogance of European philology"¹⁸—was clear to everybody who knew his creative work. As M. K. Azadovskii described his publications, "Potinin acts as an apologist and a defender of the so called 'uncivilized nations', the inhabitants of Siberia, Mongolia, and the Central Asian steppes and its foothills."¹⁹

The essence of Potinin's research was the search for the primary mythological tropes about the creation of the world among the folklore of the peoples of Central Asia, Siberia, European Russia, and Western Europe.²⁰ He saw these tropes as forming the basis for later folkloric innovations. It is important to note that Potinin saw Central Asia, and part of Mongolia (in particular the region between the Orkhon and the Enisei) to be the homeland of a root trope that later fractured into a

number of motifs that then spread through Eurasia at the dawn of civilization. He associated the spread of the central mythical tropes across the Old World and the Near East with the “conceptual hurricane” (*ideinyi uragan*) that accompanied the migration of tribes from East to West as well as with the diffusion stemming from long-term ethnocultural contacts.²¹ The archaeological data of the time confirmed the presence of those contacts and gave researchers some evidence to suggest that the plots and legends migrated with the nomads along the steppe corridor from Northern Asia to Southern Rus and then to Western Europe.

Potanin considered the presence of the parallel motifs to be proof of Eastern influence. In particular, he noted the similarities between the terms and the proper names of the protagonists of Asian and European folklore. He registered more than a thousand cases of overlap in folkloric motifs among more than 40 nations. Experts then and now praise his conscientious work as well as the novelty and great quantity of his collections and analyses. The parallels he discovered are seen to be germane to both cognate and neighboring languages.²² Nevertheless, Potanin’s scientific inferences are generally criticized both by folklorists and orientalists for methodological errors. Most often, they criticize the accuracy of his transcription of personal names and a certain arbitrariness in his identification of parallels, which were in turn linked. The motifs, in turn, are often judged to be isolated from the general plot. Soviet-era representatives of “the historical school” of folklore studies criticized Potanin for his study of “pure folklore,” studying how folklore was rooted in specific national, social, and historical contexts, the class struggle, and the vital interests and social striving of the masses.²³

It should be noted that Potanin’s research pursued an aim that was not less urgent nor socially significant than discovering the social-historical foundations of all folklore motifs. Further, his work on the Mongolic and Turkic nations does not come across as being disconnected from his research object, nor did he treat them as a common mass. To the contrary, as V. A. Gordlevskii noted,²⁴ Potanin’s programs for studying folklore were aimed at representing human life from birth to death in national poetic traditions.

Potanin, who called himself “a simple folklorist,” admitted the shortcomings and mistakes of his own “etymological studies” and did not overstep his hypothesis. In his letters to the orientalists Ol’denburg, Vasiliev, L. N. Maikov, V. F. Miller and others, he did not simply admit but stressed the amateurish character of his own work and encouraged critique and debate. In these letters, one feels Potanin’s wish to give an

impulse to the serious study of the folklore of the steppe peoples by encouraging a critical response to his "philological imagination" from thoughtful scientists.²⁵

Potanin was not the first to propose the hypothesis that Oriental cultures influenced Russian and European culture in the sphere of folk poetry, ceremonies, and everyday life. The Russian scientists Stasov, K. D. Kavelin, V. F. Miller, A. K. Veselovskii, and Ol'denburg associated the origin of the Russian epic and European folklore motifs with Iranian and Indian sources.²⁶ Like the European proponents of romanticism in mythology and folklore studies, they considered the possible donor of culture to be the region of the Near East, India, that is, those countries well known to host the oldest cultures of the East. They knew little about Siberia and Central Asia with their Ugro-Finnic, Turkic, and Mongol populations. "In comparison with Europe and that part of the East which caught their interest, this East seemed too uncivilized to warrant a search for the sources of European literature," wrote Potanin's contemporary M. Speranskii.²⁷ Ol'denburg called Potanin a pioneer in bringing the East into world cultural history and to the attention of Europeans.²⁸ Having discovered the wealth of the oral prose and spiritual culture of the Turks and the Mongols of Siberia and Central Asia, he directed scientists' attention to everyday life, literature, and the history "of those people and small nations who have not yet seemed to be important subjects of study."²⁹

Potanin's work was more decisive than that of his predecessors. For him, the theory of the co-authored history (*sotvorchestvo*) of the peoples of the East and the West had not only an academic, but an ideological or to be more exact a moral and political significance. The 'Eastern hypothesis', as with the 'Varangian theory', was not accepted in its time. Several contemporaries greeted these ideas with hostility, believing that they cast doubt on the uniqueness of Russian culture. Stasov, having developed the idea that Indian motifs were primary in European and Russian epics, wrote: "Of course I can predict who will not accept my research: they are the Moscow Slavophiles and the Petersburg *ruspiaty*."³⁰ The mere idea that Russians might have borrowed cultural elements from the wild nomads and barbarians offended their national dignity.³¹

The historian P. A. Bessonov, who in the mid-1880s tried to prove the absence of any Asian borrowings in European culture, concluded that "the Aryan and Indo-European worlds" (in which he included Russia) or the "the world of the historic nations" had always been rich and complete.³² He continued,

Nobody has every heard of, seen, or known of any historical examples of such peoples [Russians] being influenced by non-peoples [*nenarodny*], immature or incompletely formed nations, tribes or pre-organic branches of tribes who speak unknown languages, who have no organization structure and language. ... [These people are] inferior in all aspects, even in physical racial aspects. ... They are of an alien political status.³³

His conclusions arose from the thesis that Russia suffered from and was exploited by nomads. He could not see evidence of any cultural borrowings: "The nomads as a tribe could not offer Russians anything. They were not a nation; they were stateless, held preliminary phases of religion, had no agriculture nor a settled way of life. They lacked anything progressive."³⁴

It was not only the 'prestigious' quality of European culture that led scholars to deny any nomadic cultural influence on Europe. Bessonov himself admitted that "the questions of ... Turkic-Mongol influence, and of its resistance to it or pressure upon it stands urgently upon today's agenda. This includes understanding the pure or mixed status of the population, and whether or not the Turks and Mongols have influenced the present social structure and type of governance. This is also closely connected with the problem of the *inorodtsy* in general."³⁵ The conclusion of his historic overview of Russian history was that "the Tatars were the reason our history was created." Instead of searching for "the Tatar influence" it was better "to weigh all the strengths and the conveniences brought to us by the Tatars: civilization and Christianity."³⁶ This illustrated a clear understanding of the link between cultural heritage with the content and aims of the aboriginal policy.

The view of Russian history as a history free of any Asian cultural influence corresponded to a change of ideology at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries with respect to nationality policy and new administrative plans for nomadic peoples. The new government policy was aimed at Russifying *inorodtsy* as well as subjecting them to social and economic assimilation. Works like Bessonov's called for Russians to change their outlook on ethnic relations. They called for Russians to distance themselves psychologically from those alien peoples living in Russia. In accordance with the government's new economic interests and a new home policy it was no longer convenient to consider them an organic part of Russian society but instead as external appendages to Russian politics.

The denial that Russia and Asia had common cultural-historic roots in turn changed how the future of Russia's 'aliens' were imagined. The

same Bessonov, for example, divided the nations into categories that matched their cultural level. Only nations of the first category were recognized to have a future. These were a few culturally independent "primary nations" (*pervoychnye natsii*) who had established their own state with a corresponding historical and cultural heritage. As "second-rate nations" he included those "not even peoples but tribes," for example nomadic peoples, who "had missed their moment and opportunity for [historical] development." These peoples were supposed to either die out or join the "primary nations" (since they were not supposed to have enough of their own vitality in order to develop). Another option was that they would "ripen" (*dozreet*) under the influence of the "primary nations" and possibly could even start their own "positive history." In the "third sub-category" he included "the feral degenerates" of the second-rate nations, by which he meant the indigenous peoples of Siberia, America, and Africa, who had lost their national identity. He thought since they had been defeated in war or had joined cultural centers that they would "die out in any event due to their distance from centers of enlightenment (*vospityvaishchii tsestr*). Alternatively, they would be "re-processed [*pererabotany*] by the primary nations."³⁷ This monocentric version of the historical evolution of mankind seemed to scientifically confirm the fatalism of this outcome.

Potanin's "Eastern hypothesis," which acknowledged the equal value of the cultural heritage of the Asian nations, was also closely connected with the tasks of pragmatic goals. Having formulated a different vision of Eastern cultures, it created different "political technologies for *inorodtsy*." This aspect of Potanin's theory was recognized by his contemporaries: "Potanin proposed that the entire territory of Central Asia may have given [cultural] gifts to Europe, and that now it was time for Russia to thank Asia as one good turn deserves another."³⁸

This ideological coloring of "the Eastern hypothesis" was evident in almost all the works of Potanin the folklorist and Potanin the ethnographer. It defined not only his scientific passions but his "heretical spirit." It was the latter that encouraged him to credit the ancient steppe belief—shamanism—with having a direct effect upon the proto-Buddhist cult of Central Asia, and some of the Christian apocrypha, from which, in turn, one could infer the origin of European culture: Christianity.³⁹ Potanin linked the ancient Greek myths, which were commonly acknowledged to have provided the ancient sources of European civilization, to the spiritual creative action of the nomadic peoples. Specifically, he drew thematic parallels between a Mongolian legend about a tsar-donkey and the legend of Midas; a story about Chingiz

and the Percey myth; and a legend about Aria-Balo and Apollo. He also linked Hercules with Irlyk and compared the epic story of Geser with those of the Iliad and Odyssey.⁴⁰ "Much of what we do not understand, and of whence it came, can be attributed to the nomads from Central Asia," he wrote to D. Klements.⁴¹

These innovative leaps of inspiration were caused not only by the low level of development of his discipline at that time, but also by aspects of his own personality, as he confessed to Ol'denburg.⁴² While still living in Nikol'sk, and before he was introduced to the huge ethnographic collections from the steppes, Potanin wrote to Iadrintsev about the similarity he noticed between a Kirgiz fairy tale and several ancient Greek myths.⁴³ The "strange facts" of similarities in the pronunciation of certain personal and geographical names also drew his attention. The main theme of his future theory, that these plots had an eastern origin, was visible even then in what he called his "ethnographic fantasies," which he shared with people often at that time. It should not be surprising that at the very beginning of his first expedition to Mongolia he wrote to A. S. Gatsisskii about some similarities in the pronunciation of some personal names in the languages of the Uriankhai and Kokchulunut peoples: "It seems to me that the fresh signs of ancient times are still alive here. These are signs that predate the earliest civilizations. I may be wrong, but I believe that the local legends and beliefs are older than those of the Semites. Having been born here, they migrated to the West along with the Semites. The legend of Adam and Eve was first told here in local languages."⁴⁴ His choice of a region and people to whom to devote his life's work was characteristic of a patriot of Siberia and completely corresponded to his social goals. The "Eastern hypothesis" is a peculiar and rather strong reaction to Eurocentrism. It projected *oblastichestvo* aims and understandings firmly into cultural history. It spoke of a striving to overcome the inequality between center and periphery by giving the latter priority and by even asserting its cultural superiority.

His research topic overlapped not only with his worldview but also with aspects of his personal life. This is evident in the deep excitement one can read in Potanin's letters. After the death of his wife, A. V. Potanina, he wrote to D. Klements that the only way "to forget my sad loneliness" was "to work harder at drawing parallels and to make things draw together."⁴⁵ This is a fragment of his letter to Mendel'son written in 1898: "I am so absorbed in my fairy tales that I don't go out or write to anybody and can hardly stop my work. If my guests are not inclined to listen to stories about Amiran and Avlokiteshvar, I become

indifferent to them. If I am invited just for mere lunch it gets on my nerves and I lose my temper."⁴⁶ In 1908 he wrote about his work on manuscripts of Mongolian, Tibetan, and Kirgiz fairy tales:

Through rereading them and writing commentaries to them, I have been in the pleasant and lively company of the Asian Gods. ... My inner world has changed. If I have not become an incorporeal spirit, then at least in comparison with my former self I have become far more ethereal. I haven't become a god, but I have become closer to the gods. These are not the gods that lived on Mount Olympus, and not even those that lived on Mount Sumeru, but those that live on Sumbur-Ola. Even my outward appearance has moved in that ethnographic direction, just like my inner self.⁴⁷

N. S. Smirnova admitted that Potanin the folklorist belonged to none of the existing schools of thought. Combining the methods and devices of the comparative, ethnographic, historical, and mythological schools, he became an alien to the scientific paradigms of the majority of folklorists and orientalists. This in itself caused criticism of his Eastern hypothesis during the entire twentieth century.⁴⁸ It should be noted that Potanin was acquainted with Edward Tylor's evolutionist theory that identical folkloric plots can self-generate in different parts of the world due to the psychic unity of mankind at similar stages of social development. He admitted himself that he did not have any exact evidence with which to explain the origin of similar plots: "It is not quite clear if there was mass migration of the population from the East to the West and little migration in the reverse direction, if there was constant enrichment of the West by Oriental mythic material, or if one should imagine that [the entire territory] from France to Mongolia was a huge workshop where neither the East nor the West have any priority."⁴⁹

Potanin's main aim was not to create an exceptional academic theory but to present a convincing argument that neither regions nor cultural processes are ever isolated. He argued that the history of the Eurasian continent was defined by the interrelation and mutual enrichment of its cultures and peoples. The facts confirming that cultural transfusion (*kul'turnoe donorstvo*) was not a one-way transfer of cultural material from the West to the East made possible the theoretical premise that the West and East could have a cultural conversation in the future as equal partners. In explaining his scientific priorities, Potanin argued that "one might object to" having overt sympathy for Asia, "but one should never be indifferent to the condition of the *inorodtsy*."⁵⁰

History and Culture

The historical and cultural worldview of the *oblastniki* were defined by that significant element of their ideology that rejected dividing the country into a center and a periphery. The framework set by the evolutionist conception of social and cultural phenomena was incompatible with Potanin's idea that the norm of human life was a polyphony of social, political, and cultural factors. He partially shared F. Ratzel's theory of cultural diffusion, according to which the origin of the elements of each culture is associated with a definite geographical region.⁵¹ According to his idea, the main force behind the development of cultures was the fact that these people formed various relationships between them. In his Eastern hypothesis, Potanin developed the idea that different nations held ethnographic kinship even though they might be different by blood. He proposed that there was a natural opportunity to build bridges across cultures which, in turn, also needed each other.

The *oblastniki* also completely accepted the evolutionist explanation that diverse cultures held differing levels of development. The thesis that cultural variety resulted from the way cultures adapted to different natural and historical conditions also provided them with a justification for their idea that all elements in aboriginal cultures were interrelated. The *oblastniki* argued that it was necessary to study the way of life of Siberian peoples as a complex whole due to the fact that their economy, racial forms, ideas of property, social organization, spiritual life, and so forth formed a single system. They also argued that political policy should be designed keeping the integrity of their cultures in mind. For instance, in one of his articles, Potanin wrote that Buriat customs, traditions, land tenure, religious beliefs, and understanding of nature, "everything in their life ... presents a single integral system." Potanin stressed the need to take into consideration the interdependence and the vital functions of every cultural aspect when "introducing any kind of innovation into the life of the Buriat people."⁵²

The *oblastniki* worldview was also similar to that of the functionalists, who argued that a culture could contain no extra or unnecessary elements, that every component performed a role in providing a living for the people. They argued that any one component could only be analyzed with this principle in mind. Differences between cultures were considered to be a great value, and not an anachronism. This quality, argued the *oblastniki*, made it natural that mankind be divided into autonomous cultural communities. They saw it as self-evident that there

was a strong link between recognizing the unique cultural quality (*pokrov*) of each society and its political right to sovereignty and independence.

Such a worldview required that they synthesize different ethnological methods. To be more exact, their synthesis demonstrated those aspects of ethnology that matched their own social and political arguments. Thus, they never rejected the evolutionist ideas of the psychological unity of mankind or that societies of similar types were related. These ideas made it objectively possible that people could understand and interact with each other. This idea was silently expressed through the peculiar way that Potanin illustrated his works with vignettes of various cultural practices that at first glance did not seem to be linked. He had a rare ability during his travels of being able to "reach out to people." We can feel the unity of mankind in his captivating description of different individuals in his letters and travel journals. His portraits of aborigines did not carry an "exotic" element to them. They were devoid of that illustrative technique whereby the Other was understood subconsciously as 'abnormal' and was thus 'assimilated' into one's consciousness.⁵³

But the *oblastniki* were not satisfied with a narrow, unilinear scheme of cultural evolution. They were not interested in the ability to rank and compare cultures and to evaluate their future like Bessonov. The moral significance of Darwinism, and the sociological idea of "historical selection" that was suggested by his idea of natural selection, was immediately evident to these scholars. N. Ia. Danilevskii (one of the founders of the theory of how history moves forward through 'civilizing' processes) severely criticized evolutionary theory both as a worldview and as a philosophical idea. In order to prove his point that nature was more complex than this limited theory could describe, he listed examples of biological organisms which could not be explained from an evolutionist point of view. He critiqued the search for external principles, which only permitted certain forms (and not others) to exist as if it were a sieve allowing only certain beings of a definite size and form to pass.⁵⁴ Danilevskii instead described nature's expediency in preserving the variety and uniqueness where "every being is given its own sphere from which it is difficult to be forced out by others."⁵⁵ Potanin's worldview similarly favored the idea that different forms of human life should coexist to create harmony in social systems.

The basic idea of the *oblastnichestvo* of 'unity in the diversity' is closest to an idea of cultural pluralism. They did not believe in a transcendental 'culture in general' but that there were a great number of local cultures. They argued that the social practice of every community

had to be evaluated from the point of view of the needs and interests of its own culture. There was certain similarity between Potanin's views, and what we will identify below as Iadrintsev's views, with the cultural relativism in the last decade of the nineteenth century. This theory holds that every culture is unique and can only be understood from within its own criteria and not the criteria set by European history alone. These ideas were very close to the proposal of the *oblastniki* that one must set limits when applying European ethics and cultural and economic norms. They proposed that there should be boundaries to the European enthusiasm to reorganize the lives of non-European peoples according to their own ideals of the good life.

Social and Policy Implications of Evolutionism

If Potanin's entire worldview presupposed cultural relativism, Iadrintsev's culturological system was a complex project that involved overturning one's perception of the way the world was put together. He also acknowledged the speculative and morally illegitimate character of evolutionism, especially as applied to its axioms and its practical implications.

In the 1860s the idea of natural selection came to dominate both the biological sciences and the description of ethnic and cultural processes in Siberia. It also became very important for Iadrintsev. He saw in Darwin's ideas a scientific justification of his thesis that Siberian people were of a special type that would have "the advantages of mixing physiologically and historically with Siberian *inorodtsy*" and who would be destined to replace "the ancient imperfect races."⁵⁶ "Darwin," wrote Iadrintsev, "unraveled the mystery of how forms disappear. ... Forms, species, and human tribes disappear due to the secrets of natural selection. When less developed forms encounter more perfect ones and the latter ... swallow the former."⁵⁷

Nevertheless, Iadrintsev's conclusion that some living forms disappear contradicted his conviction that Siberian aborigines "must play an equal role in the general history of Siberia."⁵⁸ He tried to overcome the contradiction by citing the same scientific principles. He reasoned that if mankind, through its understanding of the biological world, came to master the skills of controlling nature, then the theories of Charles Darwin could be used to evaluate the degree to which human society created the appropriate conditions for one "species" to take priority over another. "It would then follow," according to Iadrintsev, "that if we did

not intervene to change the living conditions of the *inorodtsy*, some tribes would continue to die out through the slow agony that we see today. However, this would not stand as a proof that this fate was inevitable but only that we are not yet civilized enough to save the *inorodtsy*.⁵⁹ That article, written in 1865, came to define the scientific foundation and the goals of Iadrintsev's future research.

Despite the fact that in the early 1870s Iadrintsev was convinced of the biological unity of mankind, he did not cite this idea when he recognized the cultural strengths (*polnotsennosti*) of the 'backward' nations. He tended to prove the cultural and intellectual abilities of the American Indians by their 'aptitude for civilization', by which he meant their ability to practice Christian religion, to speak European languages, and to follow European traditions. He devised a positivistic critique of the colonial policies of the European powers, who used severe exploitation and physical extermination to eliminate the 'savages'. He saw these policies as inevitably holding historical progress back, as well as being inhumane. He wrote that, "It is funny and unscholarly to place the blame [for the dying out of the aborigines] ... squarely upon the barbarity of the victorious colonialists." Instead, he thought that a "scientific" approach to this problem would discover the reasons for their extinction in certain "natural factors."⁶⁰

He wrote in one of his letters that one of the inevitable products of colonialization (i.e., the expansion of European civilization) was a change in the physical and psychological condition of the 'aliens', which had a fatal effect upon them. "The more backward the race is, the more stagnant it becomes in its savage condition. The lower its culture, the more severe the impact of civilization and the sooner comes their extinction." He expressed various other social Darwinist ideas and even made a sort of classification of the aborigines of different colonies based on their ability to be civilized.⁶¹ These ideas encouraged him to apply the term "racial descent" (*ponizheniia rasy*) to the Russian population of Siberia due to the consequence of their mixing (*metisatsii*) with the aboriginal peoples of Siberia. He used this as an argument to support his plea that the state pay more attention to Siberia and especially supply Russian *Sibir-iaki* with 'civilizational' resources with which to assimilate the *inorodtsy*.

In his later works he strongly rejected the thesis that races could be unequal and that the extinction of peoples might be based in some objective historical process. As V. A. Studnitskii and E. Petri pointed out, he spent a lot of energy in his work proving the then commonly acknowledged idea that the decline in the population of the *inorodtsy* was due not to their own physiological qualities but instead to their gener-

ally poor social and economic living conditions. To some degree, this idea helped him to solve his internal struggle between his scientific convictions as Darwinist and his personal conviction as a humanist. In Iadrintsev's work one often finds warnings that one should be careful when forming conclusions concerning "the race problem" and the lower qualities of other races. He wrote that this question was "too important for mankind" and that "the historical destiny and the question of the survival of the *inorodtsy*" depended up it.⁶²

Forming his scientific views in the 1880s during his period of intense popular and educational work, Iadrintsev expressed his complete solidarity with the opinions of evolutionist Petri, a physical anthropologist from Bern University. Nevertheless, their works differed in the way that they understood similar problems, in their tone, and in the way they applied key tenets of evolutionary theory. While Petri argued that there were no grounds for racism and racial discrimination due to the idea of the equality of the human condition, he only focused upon those basic human qualities that distinguish man from other animals. Although he affirmed that "primitive people" were able to acquire culture, he also cited examples of their need to overcome "savage" instincts and of their passive submission to the civilizing (*kul'turtregerskii*) influence of "superior nations."⁶³

Iadrintsev, in his turn, preferred the evolutionist idea that all people and tribes shared kinship and similarities. These qualities brought humanity closer and did not divide it into ranks.

Science does not differentiate between the civilized and the savages and does not [link people of different stages] in a chain of gradual cultural development. Ethnography should not neglect savages nor posit one condition for a savage and another a civilized man. The first goal of this science should be to reconcile a fragmented human condition.⁶⁴

This evaluation of the moral and philosophical nature of evolutionism was also true of his work. He also applied this moralistic interpretation to the way that he reconciled stage theory and the universal historical destiny of mankind. He called on the representatives of "the superior culture" who did not understand the life of "the primitive tribes" "not to forget that they too suffered through the same stage and that this stage serves as a link for further development."⁶⁵ Iadrintsev criticized those aspects of evolutionism that provided a scientific justification of an unjust, indifferent, or scornful attitude to 'inferior' cultures.

Society in the recent past was not ready to accept the idea that cultures could be considered equal even if they differed from each other.

According to mass consciousness, the real foundation for human equality, dignity, respect, and compassion was the identity and similarity of cultures. Hence, the thesis that all people shared a psychological and historical kinship and a common cultural and historical future had great significance. When providing readers with information about the culture of the Siberian nations and the ways they organized their economy and everyday life, Iadrintsev would draw the reader's attention to similarities. He would draw special attention to the similarities of an old Altaic costume to those of Russian, Swiss, and Chinese peasants (among others); the likeness between their occupations and those of the ancestors of the Europeans; and the possibility of revealing the secrets behind a number of habits and beliefs of the 'civilized nations' through the way of life of the *inorodtsy*.⁶⁶

He stressed the great importance for Russia of having the right vision of "the mutual relations among nations," which unlike Europe, was "isolated from the influence of non-Russian alien peoples." He saw Russia as set within a process of historic and ethnographic contact (*sosedstvo*) and mixing with the *inorodtsy*.⁶⁷ Almost every issue of his newspaper *Vostochnoe obozrenie* published material that was of an "educational nature" in order to overcome prejudice among "half-educated society." Iadrintsev was one of those few people who highly appreciated the work of N. N. Miklukho-Maklai, which otherwise did not enjoy serious attention from either scientists or the public at that time.⁶⁸ Iadrintsev stressed neither the exotic character of the traveler's adventures nor the heroism of his scientific deeds but "the great public and moral significance" of his research that could "break down prejudice [and] strike the right social attitude toward ... those places that are different from civilized [places]."⁶⁹

Confirming the ideologically important thesis that "low-cultured peoples" were part of mankind and were indeed closer to the civilized world than it had been supposed, Iadrintsev developed ideas compatible with Potanin's Eastern hypothesis. "The key to the kinship of the Asian and European nations" he found in the similarities between the runic inscriptions discovered by A. V. Andrianov on the Minusinsk steppes and European ones. This similarity, for him, presupposed the ancient migration of tribes from Asia to Europe. He gave preference to this theory over those of a number of orientalists who wrote of the European origin of the inscriptions.⁷⁰ In the same manner, he chose to reflect upon the above-mentioned article of Vasiliev concerning the mutual interrelationship of the East and the West in his editorial to the very first issue of *Vostochnoe obozrenie*—an article that defined the spirit of the

newspaper and the position of its editorial board. Here he attached great importance to the fact that these two “brothers of a common mother” interacted historically and shared a common origin through “the interchange of two worlds economically and in the sphere of ideas.”⁷¹

Appreciating the merits of the evolutionist idea, Iadrinsev adhered to evolutionist principles when conducting his scientific work. He considered evolutionism to be the only scientific basis that permitted an impartial attitude to all forms of life and that allowed one to understand things that seemed strange or incompatible.⁷² He also moderated his research with public goals in mind. He understood the practical problems that might arise depending on how he framed his research topics. For this reason, he did not stress the Eurocentric roots of evolutionism but instead found within it a different value system and a different way to understand forms of “indigenous life.” For this reason, his views on nomadic culture are particularly interesting.

To the popular mind, as in science and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, anything Asian (*aziatschina*) implied something extremely negative. Even well-educated people did not recognize the unjust way that nomadic culture was evaluated in the works of historians in the nineteenth century.⁷³ This stereotype has not even been completely overcome in contemporary cultural studies.⁷⁴ The reason why steppe cattle-breeding communities were seen to be stagnant or at a historical impasse was due to the fact that scientists lacked criteria for studying nomadism other than those developed for settled agricultural communities. For a very long time it was thought that it was a historical law that the nomadic way of life would decay and that nomads would shift to settled forms of activities.

Iadrinsev’s different view of the culture of the steppe nomadic people might have been formed as a reaction to government policy. He realized that the popular idea that nomadic life was stagnant and lacked any historical vision of development was best explained not by recollections of nomadic raids or claims on their land. He saw these ideas linked to Eurocentrism. He spoke against the tendency of the public to “consider any other form of life as a great error and a bad [*durnaia*] habit.”⁷⁵ He suggested interpreting nomadism as a complicated socio-economic phenomenon that could not be understood by means of a unilinear concept of social evolution. Defending the historical dignity and the cultural status of the Asian peoples, *oblastniki* often cited historical and archaeological data about the high culture of these supposed barbarians: about their metal-producing technologies, ancient traditions of agriculture, handicrafts, science, written languages, state organiza-

tion, poetry, and fascinating mythology, and the way that the West borrowed cultural traits from the East.⁷⁶

The fact that most nomadic peoples since ancient times had combined both sedentarism and certain agricultural techniques along with their nomadic lifestyles inspired Iadrintsev to develop a new vision of nomadic history.⁷⁷ Iadrintsev could not help but notice that this special world had its own evolutionary dynamics. These were embodied in certain forms that harmonized with the environment, landscape, economic activities, social structure, customs, personality, spiritual culture, physical type, and world outlook. They lent stability to nomadic cultures and an ability to settle own inner crises through altering productive techniques and social forms.⁷⁸ According to Iadrintsev, "Nomadic culture ... was created especially for its environment and takes on forms that are difficult to change."⁷⁹ He drew this conclusion, implying that the nomadic way of life in its variety of forms was not just one of many universal cultural stages but a special type of civilization.

As Iadrintsev followed his own research in the 1870s and 1880s, a panorama opened before him of the cultural development of the various Siberian nations. This encouraged him to identify a number of inaccuracies and omissions in evolutionary theory. First of all, he drew the conclusion that the identification of stages as pure forms represented "history as [a set of] broken links" of vagrant, nomadic, shepherd, agricultural stages.⁸⁰ For example, the real economic action of the taiga peoples of Siberia; such as the Kuznetsk and Biisk Tatars of Tomsk province, the Enisei '*inorodtsy*', and the Voguls of Tobolsk province; represented a simultaneous combination of different occupations and subsistence strategies. It is difficult to assign them to a specific cultural-economic type.⁸¹ Iadrintsev also underlined that Siberian settled fishermen and hunters, who occupied a lower position than the nomads in evolutionary classifications, had economic and lifestyle qualities that placed them closer to "the superior culture" than that of the nomads.⁸²

But he did not reject evolutionism in his published works of the 1880s. He presented the results of his research not as data to revise the theory but as information to specify and supplement a speculative theory. For instance, Iadrintsev saw the culture of "the forest nomads," which up until now had not fit any traditional classification, as an intermediate stage. He saw it as a "missing link" on the way from a nomadic to a settled way of life. He wrote of the economic activities of peoples undergoing cultural change as if they were transitional species at the point of extinction.⁸³ He emphasized especially that the agricultural nations of Europe had already passed through this stage. He con-

stantly underscored that the “moral” of evolutionism was that “the gap by which we separate the European and Asian worlds and cultures is not so great when we study history closely.”⁸⁴

Iadrintsev also used evolutionist propositions in order to scientifically ground his opposition to unauthorized projects that limited the ability of nomads to use land or that transferred them to a settled and agricultural way of life.⁸⁵ His research into transitional forms of culture provided the basis for his “theory of introducing a settled way of life,” which took the form of a set of practical recommendations for government programs. Its main theme was that “a settled way of life crystallizes gradually” and only where conditions are favorable for it. Iadrintsev considered that the necessary conditions for cultural change were those that appeared internally—in a natural way. He saw change appearing gradually and not through revolution. He wrote, “The more ... life, history, and culture prepare the way for a natural transition, the higher the susceptibility [of a culture] to a settled way of life.” He saw this as explaining the fact that “forest people adapt easier and better to a settled way of life than those living on the steppes, who cannot be forced to change their style of living artificially.”⁸⁶

Among the factors that promoted the transition to a settled way of life, Iadrintsev listed natural conditions, the conditions of everyday economic life, proximity to Russian villages, and trade with peasants.⁸⁷ He tried to prove that all artificial measures, let alone compulsory ones, were doomed to fail. As an example he compared the experience of the Altai mission in organizing model settlements of christened, settled Altai people with the positive results that followed when Altaic people had free contact with Russian peasants. His powerful conclusion, that “to study these conditions, to understand where the transition has already started and to render assistance only in case of necessity is the task of a cultured people—the civilizers,”⁸⁸ was motivated by evolutionist ideals.

At the same time, the research into the economy and everyday life of Siberian peoples led Iadrintsev to the tenets of classical evolutionism, that the main indicator of cultural progress was progressive development in stages. According to this theory, progress followed from the gradual development of one phenomena from several others through an increase in the density of material culture, which in turn led to a qualitative change. This change was the development of a new cultural and economic type and the transition to a higher stage of development. Iadrintsev came up with a new understanding of progress based on his practical observation that improvements in material culture, changes

in productive techniques, and the appearance of new economic activities could stretch over centuries within a single hunting or pastoral type of lifestyle.⁸⁹

Iadrintsev did not see progress as only being a shift in stages or in the main economic activities of a society. It never took on the same form for all cultural types. A criterion of progress might also be improvements of techniques and occupations within one cultural-economic type. Hence, "the cultural abilities of the *inorodtsy* ... should not be evaluated by their transition to a higher cultural stage followed by a change of their conditions of life, as proposed by the theorists and Kulturtraegers. Instead, they should be evaluated by gradual changes within occupations and trades, such as new customs, inventions and improvements, which all help people adapt to nature."⁹⁰ In this way, Iadrintsev came to the conclusion that to characterize the progress of a culture it was better to use inherent principles that did not presuppose any comparison with outside cultural measures instead of the external criteria corresponding to the principles of "historical selection." Iadrintsev's vision of understanding culture "from the inside" and his skill of overcoming one's own cultural background was inspired the sinologist I. Bichurin who, "having become a Chinese himself," became imbued with the intellectual and spiritual life of the Chinese.⁹¹

Iadrintsev observed that the *inorodtsy* did not lose their economy and way of life even when they moved from one developmental stage to another, but that instead they improved it. He used this to conclude that their devotion to "barbaric" occupations continued due to objective factors: the peculiar natural and sociocultural conditions of their lives.⁹² Iadrintsev suggested that scholars identify both the relative changes taking place within a culture and its conformity with the environment as that culture's "impartial" form: "Today a man, a race, a tribe cannot be considered irrespective of the environment and the place in which they live."⁹³ Iadrintsev stressed that "the life of *inorodtsy*" was not arbitrary and that it should be understood by the means by which it "adapted itself to nature."

Through giving examples of the phenomenon of "adapting oneself" (*prinorovleniia*) among the nomadic and "polar" people, he paid attention to the expediency of those aspects of a culture that had been interpreted as the elements of cultural backwardness⁹⁴: "What seems strange and funny in the lives of these people is only the perception of a haughty European, in fact, everything is optimally adapted to quite varied living conditions."⁹⁵ In such a way, 'backwardness' was not simply justified by the objective life conditions. It was interpreted in a dif-

ferent light as the way a people placed themselves (*vpisannost'*) within a regional ecosystem. That was why, in his view, progress did not everywhere take the form of a complicated social structure accompanied with dynamic changes in the economy. Iadrintsev suggested labeling the stable and ecologically sustainable socioeconomic organization of nomadic and Northern peoples a special type of development and not an example of stagnation. In this system, change took place at a micro level without causing a complete replacement of the system.

He contrasted his ideas to the administrative interpretation of the cultures of the *inorodtsy* as “the lifestyle of wild people.” He also challenged the administrative opinion that their “traditional economic activities were uneconomic, inferior, not worthy of protection and support; and that the very destruction [of their culture] would be to promote their transition to a higher cultural stage.”⁹⁶ Iadrintsev looked towards what was at the time the most authoritative theory—the theory of evolution—to make his observations scientific. It was an aid to cure the common prejudice that “cultures and civilizations, which had developed in a different manner, seemed to other nations to be strange or incongruous.” He spoke against the prejudice that provided the grounds for “anybody to humiliate anything he does not understand.”⁹⁷

His analysis in his 1891 paper “The significance of nomadic lifestyles to the history of human culture,” was arranged in such a way as to make the reader doubt the value of a Eurocentric approach.⁹⁸ In fact, Iadrintsev anticipated the basic principles of functionalism when thinking about how one perceives a different culture. “In given local conditions every culture is expedient and fulfills its own purpose,” he wrote.⁹⁹ He saw every form of human life as worthy of value and to be understood in its own terms, by means of criteria peculiar to each case.

In order to develop such a vision, Iadrintsev went beyond simply compensating for the crude interference of the state in the lives of the “*inorodtsy*” to forming a general historical-cultural outlook. There was a time when Iadrintsev thought science to be of little use for the *oblast-nichestvo* movement. Busy with his newspaper work, articles, and newspaper satire on various aspects of Siberian life, he wrote to Potanin in 1878: “I marvel that you are eager to spend so much time in studying your legends and doing philological contriving.”¹⁰⁰ While preparing for his 1878 trip to “divine Ust'-Siura,” Iadrintsev defined the priorities of his research in the following way: “Of course I will gather all the material about the *inorodtsy*, but the main thing deserving of my attention is their everyday life and economic situation.”¹⁰¹ Of course, he did not ignore ethnographic questions either,¹⁰² but the program he drew up

was mainly aimed at studying the economic life of the *inorodtsy* that was urgent for working out “a Siberian program.”¹⁰³

Iadrintsev’s archaeological and ethnographic research, his studies of the specialist literature on the history of the Eastern nations, and his own personal understanding of the Central Asian world further influenced the direction and coloring of his works. The rich archaeological material found in Mongolia and Southern Siberia—the runic inscriptions, the palatial and household dwellings revealing ancient cultural traditions—made a profound impression on him. Under Potanin’s influence he gained an understanding and appreciation for the spiritual heritage of the peoples of that region as well,¹⁰⁴ and a keen dissatisfaction with Eurocentric ideas. “When I made the final touch to my travel notes and re-read some items, I became especially interested in the historical background of Central Asia. It seems to me that the great story of how these people migrated and settled has been completely ignored geographically and historically,” he wrote to Potanin in summer of 1890.¹⁰⁵

In general, the Central Asian plateau is assigned a minor role in history. The history of Asian culture and civilization ‘is cut out’ according to the standard set by Ritter. ‘The story of four rivers’ and a sea shore—this is where it might have huddled and where everything started. But the steppes, they could have been sort of sea, couldn’t they? The movements of the peoples of Asia represents the movement of culture itself. No! This sight must be shown.¹⁰⁶

This new sphere of his activities opened for Iadrintsev a new vision of the problem of the *inorodtsy* in connection with the perception of their culture. A new direction was added to the spectrum of “the question of the *inorodtsy*.” “I got interested in ethnography and archaeology and it unintentionally brought me to the problems of human culture in general,”¹⁰⁷ he admitted in 1890. He did not manage to put his new views systematically in any written work. We learn the results of his analysis from a private letter published posthumously. There, we find the classic evolutionist postulates of the progress of civilization in combination with quite new ideas about the variety of forms of human life. Iadrintsev declares his “awful enthusiasm” for studying “the genealogy of our Siberian tribes,” the history and cultures of the Ugro-Altai tribes, and for “the pleasure of threading very small beads on the endless string of knowledge or for gathering grains of sand for the building that seemed to have already been built.”¹⁰⁸

One of the results of his research was the discovery of “a few facts ... on the life of the savages, in other words, an attempt to tie together

a few bead threads into a [single] large costume so as to unravel the meaning of the attire of all of mankind." This project would have been difficult to complete using the postulates of evolutionism. Iadrintsev was able to realize his idea of cultural equality by going beyond the limits set by evolutionism. Having discovered the cultural achievements of Siberian aborigines—their ancient and eventful history, their spiritual culture, their material and technological achievements (metallurgy, agriculture, irrigation systems, towns, writing, etc.)—he could not help asking the question why the peoples with such great cultural background remained on the 'primitive stage'.

Iadrintsev came to the conclusion that "history of culture is the history of adaptation."¹⁰⁹ To illustrate this, he cited the functionalism of traditional dwellings, the effective system of mutual aid in tribal systems, wonderful skills of hunting, and fishing, and the profound knowledge that people held of nature and other facts that helped them adapt to the environment. The differing adaptations that people applied to different living conditions conditioned the cultural differences that one finds in the course of history. "It is not clear to me why the European nations grasped better ways of thinking and science, while the Asian nations distinguished themselves in religion and gave up on the sphere of science," admitted Iadrintsev. At the same time he developed an idea of a cultural focus in various cultures. This was a central or essential feature of a culture that, when comparing cultures, could be treated as the basis for recognizing the equality and full value of every culture. He noted that in European culture the role was played by technological developments and material production while the Asian nations achieved greater progress in the spheres requiring imagination and feeling. In the latter case, they were developed particularly in areas "where there is no reliable scientific method yet," for example, in the problems of social life. As for the culture of Siberian *inorodtsy*, Iadrintsev considered their essence to be "adapting to nature" in both spheres of material and spiritual culture, but which also transformed nature and created a sound worldview.

His thoughts came close to the notions of cultural relativism: "I must say, first of all, that I think highly of the way a savage gets to know nature. But the word 'savage' sounds unpleasant to me. I think it is not scientific. It is better to speak about a primitive people, but even here among this line of vague stages it is difficult for me to say where and when he has lost that primitive state."¹¹⁰ Realizing that there were a great number of cultures in the world that could develop in their own ways intensified a sense of tragedy when one realized that one of those

lines was broken: "A new foreign culture confronted the [Asian] tribes when they were unprepared and created a devastating effect. But those people had their own culture. That is what I study. They had their own progress, their own way of adapting themselves to life, they had their own path to the same target. And all of a sudden they die! I still can't understand it."¹¹¹

Conclusion

The fact that *oblastniki* directed their interest in history and culture towards the problems current in their day implies that their goals were not purely academic. It would be incorrect to say that *oblastniki* drew ethnopolitical conclusions directly from their scientific research. To the contrary, their scientific priorities followed from the fact that their public and political stands were directed against chauvinism and the gross interference in the life of the aboriginal population. In addition, they strove to arouse the sympathy of Russian society and help to the *inorodtsy*. Their work introduced an element of doubt into the idea that all peoples followed the same linear developmental trajectory. In fact, it directed attention towards a civilizing approach in the understanding of human history. By recognizing the unique character of every cultural group, the *oblastniki* also deepened the significance of the authoritative theory of their day—evolutionism. They injected into it some "kernels of common sense" that later became better known as the theories of functionalism and cultural relativism. The most important and long-lasting contribution of the *oblastniki* was the denial of ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism when comparing cultures or deciding their futures. The recognition of the equality, unique character, and value of every culture directly corresponded to *oblastnik* ideology of regionalism, the essence of which was recognizing the right of every sociocultural entity to autonomous life and control over its own development.

Elena Petrovna Kovalaschina (*kandidat* of history, lecturer) has worked in the Department of Russian History and Political Science in the Tomsk State University of Architecture and Construction since 1999. She is the author of a scientific monograph and more than 40 scholarly articles. Her academic interests cover the history of the aboriginal policy of the Russian State in Siberia, the history of Russian nationality policy, the history of social thought in Siberia in the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and ethnic relations in contemporary Russia.

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Editor's Note

This article was compiled from two working papers on the manuscript archive of N. Potanin prepared for the Baikal Archaeology Project from 2002 to 2004 (www.baikal.arts.ualberta.ca/ethnographic). The base translation was prepared by A. Chapykova. I worked with the author on how best to combine the two working papers, edited the base translation for style and accuracy, and shortened the translation for publication in *Sibirica*.

In this translation the word *inorodets* has been most often left in the original, or when translated, it has been consistently rendered as 'non-Russian alien'. The word *tuzemnyi* has been translated as 'indigenous'. The author, quite uniquely, most often uses the neutral phrase *nerusskie narody*, which is translated here as 'non-Russian peoples'. The term *inorodets* is sometimes translated as 'indigenous', however the entire argument of this article concerns the history by which people who once seemed foreign and barbaric, were made familiar through the work of the *oblastniki*.

Notes

1. The term *inorodtsy* refers to the official legal term for the non-Slavic, tribute-paying residents of the Russian Federation from the 1820s. It refers to the native peoples of Siberia as well as others. The *inorodcheskii vopros* arose in

the second half of the nineteenth century and referred to a large number of questions linked to the survival of a specific sociocultural group, like the native peoples of Siberia, within the structure of the Russian state.

2. S. F. Ol'denburg, "Ne dovol'no! K 80-letiiu G. N. Potanina," *Russkaia mysl* (Nov. 1915), 1–11; V. A. Gordlevskii, "Potanin kak narodoslovestnik," *Izbrannye sochineniia* (Moscow, 1968), t. 4; M. N. Speranskii, manuscript on the work of G. N. Potanin, in the Manuscript Archive of the Scientific Library of Tomsk State University [ANBTGU] fond 139 folios 6204–6220.

3. M. A. Miropiev, *O polozhenii russkikh inorodtsev* (Saint Petersburg, 1901), 338, 341–350.

4. N. S. Smirnova, "Potanin—sobiratel' i issledovatel' kazakhskoi narodnoi poezii." *Kazakhskii folklor v sobranii G. N. Potanina (Arkhivnye materialy i publikatsii)* (Alma-Ata, 1972), 5–44.

5. A. M. Sagalaev and V. M. Kriukov, *G. N. Potanin: opyt osmysleniia lichnosti* (Novosibirsk, 1991).

6. Ol'denburg, "Ne dovol'no!" 2.

7. V. P. Vasil'ev, "Vostok i Zapad." *Vostochnoe obozrenie*, 1 April 1882, 2–5.

8. *Ibid.*, 2.

9. *Ibid.*, 4.

10. See for example the editorial "Novoe otnoshenie Evropy k Azii," *Sibir'*, 4 January 1876, 1–2.

11. *Ibid.*, 2.

12. N. M. Ekspeditsiia, "Przheval'skogo (Iz Vernogo)," *Vostochnoe obozrenie*, no. 1 (1886): 8.

13. In his letter to N. I. Naumov, who had encouraged him "to abandon his military service and to go to the university," young Potanin wrote that before starting academic training it was important to be morally ready, and that "one's interest in science" had to be based on "an interest in doing good": "You should wish and strive for science in order to serve science and humanity, and not merely as a trade to earn your daily bread." G. N. Potanin, *Pis'ma*, ed. Iu. P. Kozlov et al., (Irkutsk: Izd-vo Irkutskogo Gos Universiteta, 1987) t. 1, 36. See also Potanin's letter to A. D. Shaitanov about the social role of science (April 1863): *Pis'ma*, t. 1, 65; A. D. Shaitanovu, 29 dekabria 1864g. *Ibid.*, 71; Pis'mo G. N. Potanina N. M. Iadrintsevu 4 apreliia 1873g. *Pis'ma*, t. 1, 40 and others in this volume.

14. See, for example: V. K. Korzhavin, "Obshchestvenno-politicheskie vzgliady N. M. Iadrintseva" (Diss. kandidata istoricheskikh nauk, Kemerovo State University, 1973), 2.

15. Pis'mo N. M. Potanina Iadrintsevu 6 August 1874g. *Pis'ma G. N. Potanina*. t. 2, 124; Pis'mo Potanina N. Ia. Agafonovu, aprel' 1875g. *Pis'ma G. N. Potanina*, t. 2, 160.

16. Khamaganov M. P., *Buriatskaia folkloristika*. (Ulan-Ude, 1962): 305–315. Ia. P. Koshelev, *Russkaia folkloristika Sibiri (XIX—nachalo XX vv)* (Tomsk, 1962), 178–179, 185. Gordlevskii, "Potanin kak narodoslovestnik," 449; Smirnova, *Potanin—sobiratel' i issledovatel' kazakhskoi narodnoi poezii*, 22–24.

17. Gordlevskii, "Potanin kak narodoslovesnik," 451.
18. Smirnova, *Potanin—sobiratel' i issledovatel' kazakhskoi narodnoi poezii*, 24. This idea was obvious to his contemporary Potanin. See Ol'denburg, "Ne dovol'no!" 9; Speranskii, ANBTGU.
19. M. K. Azadovskii, *Istoriia russkoi folkloristiki* (Moscow, 1963), t. 2, 277.
20. Smirnova pointed out that Potanin was the first to suggest the theory of a binary structure to the myth that lay at the basis of a number of fairy tales, legends, etc. Contemporary folklore experts now consider this to be a scientific theory and no longer a hypothesis. *Ibid.*, 31.
21. G. N. Potanin, *Vostochnye motivy v srednevekovom epice* (Moscow, 1899), 1.
22. See N. S. Smirnova in *ibid.*, 37.
23. See M. P. Khamaganov in Potanin, *Vostochnye motivy v srednevekovom epice*, 193–194.
24. Gordlevskii, "Potanin kak narodoslvesnik," 456.
25. See *Pis'ma G. N. Potanina*. t. 4, 5.
26. See G. N. Potanin, *Tanguto—Tibetskaia okraina Kitaia i Tsentral'naia Mongolia: Puteshestvie G. N. Potanina, 1884–1886gg*, (Saint Petersburg, 1893) t. 2., ii–vii.
27. Speranskii, ANBTGU, folio 6206.
28. Ol'denburg, "Ne dovol'no!" 2.
29. Speranskii, ANBTGU, folio 6206–6207.
30. V. V. Stasov, *Blistatel'nyi triumvirat, Sobr. Soch*, Spb. 1894, t. 3, column 1288.
31. For example, M. A. Miropiev, who was a constant opponent to the *oblastniki*, called it betraying Russian culture. See M. A. Miropiev, *O Polozhenie russkikh inorodtsev*, 66–67.
32. P. A. Bessonov, *Mnimyi tiranizm russkikh. K voprosu ob inorodtsakh i peregeleniakh v Rossii*. (Moscow, 1885), 15.
33. *Ibid.*, 61–62.
34. *Ibid.*, 77–110.
35. *Ibid.*, 5.
36. *Ibid.*, 118.
37. *Ibid.*, 69.
38. *Ibid.*, 447.
39. "Now I am inclined to think more than ever that Christianity originated from the Finnish tribes in Southern Siberia. That Mongol Nestorian vision according to which Christ was called Erke was not a sect brought from the West but it was the origin of Christianity. The legends of the mission, of God's son, appeared in Siberia." *Pis'mo Potanina N. M. Iadrntsevu. Pervaia polovina marta 1879g. Pis'ma G. N. Potanina*. t. 3, 166. See also *pis'mo Maikovu, dekabr' 1880g. Ibid.*, 193–202. Potanin devoted almost all his ethnographic, folkloric, and other works to working out his 'Eastern hypothesis'. The following works as the main ones: *Vostochnye motivy v srednevekovom epice* (Moscow: Izdanie geograficheskogo otdeleniia Imperatorskogo obshchestva liubitelei estestvoznaniia, antropologii i etnografii, 1899); *Ocherki Severo-Zapadnoi Mongolii*

(Saint Petersburg, 1881), t. 4; *Skazanie o Syne neba* (Saint Petersburg, 1883); *Erke—kul't syna neba v Severnoi Azii* (Tomsk, 1916); *Skazka s dvenadzat'iu personazhami* (1914); *Saga o Solomone: Vostochnye materialy k voprosu o proiskhozhdenii sagi* (Tomsk, 1912); "Mongolskoe skazanie o Geser Khane po voprosu o proiskhozhdenii russkikh bylin," *Vestnik Evropy*, no. 5, (1890): 121–158 and others.

40. Pis'mo N. M. Potanina Mendel'sonu 10 noiabria 1891g. *Pis'ma G. N. Potanina*. t. 4., 200. See also *Pis'ma D. I. Klements*u 21 ianvaria 1894g. *Ibid.*, 243. D. Klementu, (24 ianvaria 1895g.): 288–289; on the analogies between the Mongol "steppe pantheon" and Dionysus, Pluto, Apollo, and others, in the ANBTGU fond 171 and others.

41. Pis'mo Potanina D. I. Klementsu ot 24 okt. 1891g. *Pis'ma G. N. Potanina*, t. 4, 192–193.

42. Pis'mo Potanina F. Ol'denburgu 17 sent. 1915g. *Pis'ma G. N. Potanina*, t. 5, 134.

43. Pis'mo Potanina N. M. Iadrintsevu 26 apr. 1873g. *Pis'ma G. N. Potanina*, t. 1, 175.

44. Pis'mo Potanina A. Gatsisskomu 18 marta 1877g. *Pis'ma G. N. Potanina*, t. 3, 81.

45. Pis'mo Potanina D. Klementsu 23 ianv. 1894g. *Pis'ma G. N. Potanina*, t. 4, 243.

46. Pis'mo Potanina Mendel'sonu ot 16 fevr. 1898g. *Pis'ma G. N. Potanin* t. 3, 317.

47. *Pis'ma G. N. Potanina*, t. 5, 92.

48. Smirnova, *Potanin—sobiratel' i issledovatel' kazakhskoi narodnoi poezii*, 41.

49. G. N. Potanin, *Vostochnye motivy v srednevekovom epice*, 3. See also G. N. Potanin, *Tangutsko: Tibetskaia okraina Kitaia I Tsentral'naia Mongolia*, xi.

50. Cited: Smirnova, *Potanin—sobiratel' i issledovatel' kazakhskoi narodnoi poezii*, 41.

51. F. Rattseel, *Zemliia i zhizn': sravnitel' noe zemlevedenie*, t. 1–2 (Saint Petersburg, 1903–1906); *Narodovedenie*, t. 1–2 (Saint Petersburg, 1903).

52. G. N. Potanin, *Inorodcheskaia obshchina v Sibiri. Alarskaia buriatskaia obshchina, Vostochnoe obozrenie*, no. 36 (1882): 11. See the same understanding of nomadic culture by Iadrintsev in "Znachenie kochevogo byta v istorii che-lovecheskoi kul'tury," *Sibirskie inorodtsy*, 253–255.

53. To understand this technique in detail, see R. Barthes, "The Lost Continent," in *Mythologies: Izbrannye raboty: Semiotika, Poetika* (Moscow, 1994), 71, 121–122.

54. N. Ia. Danilevskii, *Darvinizm. Kriticheskoe issledovanie*. Spb, t. 1, ch. 1 (1885): 4.

55. *Ibid.*, t. 1, ch. 2, 230–231.

56. N. M. Iadrintsev, "Etnograficheskie osobennosti sibirskogo naseleniia," *Tomskie gubernskie vedomosti*, (23 aprilia 1865): 3–4.

57. *Ibid.*, 4.

58. *Ibid.*, 4.

59. Ibid., 4.
60. Pis'ma N. M. Iadrintseva G. N. Potaninu (s 20 fevralia 1872 po 8 aprelia 1873gg.) Krasnoiarsk, Vyp. 1 (1918): 41.
61. Ibid., 85–87.
62. N. M. Iadrintsev, "Dikar' pered sudom nauki i tsivilizatsii," *Vostochnoe obozrenie*, 7 okt 1882, 1.
63. Ibid., 127.
64. N. M. Iadrintsev, "Fizicheskoe vospitanie detei raznykh plemen," *Vostochnoe obozrenie*, no. 5 (1885): 10.
65. N. M. Iadrintsev, "Znachenie kochevogo byta," 264. See also *ibid.*, 245.
66. N. M. Iadrintsev, "Altai i ego inorodcheskoe tsarstvo," 639, 641–642.
67. Iadrintsev, "Dikar' pered sudom," 1–2.
68. A. G. Grumm-Grzhimailo, N. N. Miklukho-Maklai na fone sovremennoi emu epokhi. *Izvestiia gosudarstvennogo geograficheskogo obshchestva*, t. 71, Vyp. 1–2, (1939): 127–155.
69. Iadrintsev, "Dikar' pered sudom," 1, 3.
70. N. M. Iadrintsev, "Drevnie pamiatniki i pisma v Sibiri," (1885): 16–21.
71. The editorial devoted to V. P. Vasiliev's article was called "Vostok i Zapad." *Vostochnoe obozrenie*. 1 April 1882g., 5–6.
72. Iadrintsev, "Dikar' pered sudom," 2.
73. A. M. Burovskii, "Stepnaia.skotovodchenskaia tsivilizatsiia. Kriterii opisanii, analiza, sopostavleniia," *Tsivilizatsii*, no. 3 (1996): 151–164.
74. See for example, A. I. Pershits, "Kochevniki v mirovoi istorii," *Vostok*, no. 2 (1998): 120–130.
75. For example: G. E. Markov, "Osedanie kochevnikov i formirovanie u nikh territorial'nykh obshchnostei," *Rasy i narody*, no. 4 (1974): 27–44. To this day the problem of how best to typify and classify nomadic cattle-breeding economies is not settled. This is due to the fact that researchers tried to apply universal terminology (e.g., feudalism) to societies of different types. On this problem, see the work by the same author, "Teoreticheskie problemy nomadizma v sovetskoi etnograficheskoi literature," *Istoriografiia etnograficheskogo izucheniiia narodov SSSR i zarubezhnykh stran* (Moscow, 1989): 54–70.
76. Iadrintsev, "Znachenie kochevogo byta," 243.
77. For example, Iadrintsev, "Znachenie kochevogo byta," 258–262.
78. Iadrintsev, "Znachenie kochevogo byta"; N. M. Iadrintsev, *Pervobytnoe zemledelie*, 156–177.
79. Iadrintsev, "Znachenie kochevogo byta," 247, 250–255.
80. Ibid., 253.
81. N. M. Iadrintsev, "Nachalo osedlosti, issledovanie po istorii kul'tury ugro-altaiskikh plemen," *Literaturnyi sbornik: Sobranie nauchnykh i literaturnykh statei o Sibiri i Azii*, ed. N. M. Iadrintsev (Saint Petersburg, 1885), 140.
82. Iadrintsev, "Nachalo osedlosti," 142. N. M. Iadrintsev, "Altaj i ego inorodcheskoe tsarstvo," 635.
83. Iadrintsev, "Nachalo osedlosti," 142–150.

84. See Iadrintsev, "Nachalo osedlosti," 140. See also Iadrintsev, "Altai i ego inorodcheskoe tsarstvo," 635, 642.
85. See Iadrintsev, "Nachalo osedlosti," 177.
86. See, for example, Iadrintsev, "Znachenie kochevogo byta," 243.
87. Iadrintsev, "Nachalo osedlosti," 149–150.
88. Iadrintsev, "Nachalo osedlosti," 147, 149–150.
89. Iadrintsev, "Znachenie kochevogo byta," 263.
90. See, for example, Iadrintsev, "Znachenie kochevogo byta," 246.
91. Iadrintsev, *Sibirskie inorodtsy*, 157.
92. N. M. Iadrintsev, "Sud'by talantov i uchenykh (Po povodu biografii Iakinfa Bichurina)," *Vostochnoe obozrenie* no. 41 (1988), 10.
93. See Iadrintsev, "Znachenie kochevogo byta," 249.
94. *Ibid.*, 253.
95. *Ibid.*, 245–246; also: Pontanin, *Sibirskie inorodtsy*, 157–160.
96. Iadrintsev, *Sibirskie inorodtsy*, 158–160, 163–165.
97. Iadrintsev, *Sibirskie inorodtsy*, 164. See also 165ff.
98. Iadrintsev, *Znachenie kochevogo byta v istorii chelovecheskoi kul'tury. Sibirskie inorodtsy, ikh byt i sovremennoe polozenie* (Saint Petersburg, 1891), 243
99. *Ibid.*, 243–264.
100. Iadrintsev, "Dikar' pered sudom," 3.
101. ANBTGU fond 960 (2), folio 1–2.
102. Pis'mo N. M. Iadrintseva G. N. Potaninu 1878g. ANBTGU fond 963. folio 1a.
103. *Ibid.*, f. 2a.
104. Pis'mo N. M. Iadrintseva N. I. Naumovu 8 maia 1880g. ANBTGU fond 1548 folio 1.
105. See pis'mo N. M. Iadrintseva G. N. Potaninu 28 iiulia 1889g. ANBTGU fond 1532. pis'mo N. M. Iadrintseva 1 avgusta 1889g. *Ibid.* fond 1533.
106. ANBTGU Fond 438. folios 1–1a.
107. Pis'mo Potaninu 11 August 1890g. ANBTGU. Fond 1535. folios 1a–2.
108. N. M. Iadrintsev, "V chuzhykh kraiaxh," *Vostochnoe obozrenie* 36 (1890): 9.
109. N. M. Iadrintsev, *Umstvennoe razvitie i ob'em poznanii pervobytnogo cheloveka, vyiasniaemye vzgliadom na istoriiu Ugro-Altaitsev*, *Vostochnoe obozrenie* 68 (1896): 2.
110. *Ibid.*, 2.
111. *Ibid.*, 2.
112. *Ibid.*, 2.